

Modernist Sex (Paris, 24–26 Jun 26)

Université Paris Nanterre, Jun 24–26, 2026

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6th International conference of the French Society for Modernist Studies.

In her “Feminist Manifesto” (1914, published 1982), Mina Loy writes “there is nothing impure in sex—except the mental attitude to it.” This programmatic statement eloquently sums up the collective battle that modernist artists waged against the prudishness imposed by Victorian culture and American Puritanism, in which sexuality, reproduction and the body were strictly kept sub rosa. Modernist artists’ commitment to breaking those taboos in both their lives and their artistic production inevitably led to accusations of obscenity targeting many iconic figures and works, causing modernist literature itself to be compared to a form of pornography by its detractors, as studies like Rachel Potter’s *Obscene Modernism: Literary Censorship and Experiment, 1900-1940* have amply explored. Oscar Wilde’s trial for “gross indecency” in 1895 gave the initial impetus to what Paul Sheehan calls “a particularly forceful style of modernist sexuality,” and marked the beginning of a series of key legal clashes between modernist writers and morality-enforcing authorities like the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, which targeted with equal zeal the birth control pamphlets distributed by feminist activists and key modernist works such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses* or D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. Henry Miller’s 1934 *Tropic of Cancer* remained censored for obscenity in the U.S. until the Supreme Court decision which officially allowed its publication in 1964 (*Grove Press, Inc. v. Gerstein*).

However, these provocative modernist works—and others, such as Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) or William Faulkner’s *Sanctuary* (1931)—also resist the facile celebration of sexuality as able-bodied vitality, and instead interweave it with other key modernist themes like failure, difficulty, violence, castration and impotence in the wake of the physical and psychological trauma of the Great War. Others, including Claude McKay’s posthumously published *Romance in Marseille* (ca. 1929-1933, published 2020), create fruitful intersections between sexuality and disability by showing how disability may become the source of alternative forms of erotic pleasure. While modernist writings and art revisit, often through a very gendered and politicized lens, such figures and loci of forbidden fantasy as the sex worker and the brothel, modernism is also marked by the rejection of heteronormative paradigms and a commitment to a frank and uncompromising representation of queer desire, as illustrated by Bloomsbury artist Duncan Grant’s hundreds of gay erotic drawings, which have recently come to light, or by texts like Gertrude Stein’s *Q.E.D.* (1903) or Richard Bruce Nugent’s “Smoke, Lillies and Jade” (1926), among many others. Still other feminist and lesbian approaches to sex displace erotic energy from coitus towards other objects and across the text itself, as in Stein’s *Tender Buttons* (1914) and Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928). Other authors, like E.M. Forster, explored homosexual desire in works that were published posthumously, such as the

novel *Maurice* (1914, published 1971) and the story “The Life to Come” (ca. 1922, published 1972). The time lag in fact bears witness to the homophobia and repression of queer identities and practices that were concurrently trademark features of a long-predominant white male masculinist trend in modernism.

Oscar Wilde’s expatriation to France in the wake of his trial and imprisonment marked the beginning of the wave of interwar artistic expatriations in search of environments more propitious to the creation of sexually liberated alternative communities in the margins—encapsulated by texts like Djuna Barnes’ roman à clef, *Ladies Almanack* (1928). The publication of Mina Loy’s “Love Songs” in the little magazine *Others*, the serialization of *Ulysses* in *The Little Review* and of Richard Bruce Nugent’s work in the Harlem Renaissance little magazine *Fire!!* also underscores the role of little magazines in the dissemination of texts considered to be obscene. At the other end of the cultural spectrum, American pulps and related racy or “spicy” magazines, often influenced by such French periodicals as *La Vie parisienne*, *Le Rire* or *Le Sourire*, offered venues between the 1910s and 1930s for a conversation on sex in the shadow of the “new puritanism” denounced by H. L. Mencken.

The early twentieth century was also marked by a proliferation of scientific—and pseudoscientific—theories about sexuality and the differences between the sexes, like Otto Weininger’s monumental *Sex and Character* (1903), Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) or Havelock Ellis’ multi-volume *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1897-1900), breaking new ground in mapping unconscious desire but also producing problematic paradigms infused with misogyny or homophobia, like the figure of the “invert,” ambivalently interwoven in queer modernist narratives like Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) and Djuna Barnes’ *Nightwood* (1936). Likewise, Freud’s influential theory of female “penis envy” is an emblematic example of the thorough-going gender bias that Simone de Beauvoir would later decry in her key feminist study *The Second Sex* (1949).

The avant-gardes each devised novel and often contradictory ways of addressing the theme of sex: while Futurism attempted to strip sexuality from outdated sentimentalism, there is a stark contrast between the rampant misogyny of F.T. Marinetti’s manifestos and the ecstatic celebrations of female sexuality in Valentine de Saint-Point’s “Futurist Manifesto of Lust” (1913). In early modernist art movements like Fauvism, Cubism and Expressionism, female and male nudes frequently evoked an uninhibited sexuality. The works’ deformations of the figure and their integration of forms derived from non-western art broke with conventionally erotic academic models, while the turn to the “primitive,” even as it defied social norms, retained some of the prevalent gendered and racial preconceptions of the time. Dada and Surrealism deployed sexual provocation as an integral part of their *épater le bourgeois* strategies, using linguistic punning infused with sexual innuendo, the projection of human characteristics on objects and animals, and cross-dressing, to unsettle the unconscious and to deconstruct essentialized visions of sexual difference and heteronormative desire by underscoring the idea of gender as performative.

This international conference aims to prompt new reflections on the aesthetics and politics of sex in the modernist period—both in the sense of probing sexual difference and of mapping the uncharted territories of sexual desire. We invite papers tracing novel intersections across questions of sexuality and gender, class, race, and disability, or offering new perspectives on

these well-known early twentieth-century scandals, tensions and debates around sex and sexuality.

Proposals for individual papers, joint panels, and roundtable discussions are invited on the following (non-exclusive) fields of enquiry in connection with modernism, the modernist era and in modernist texts, as well as in the visual and performing arts:

- ☒ Representations of sex and sexual practices in modernist literature and art
- ☒ The role of magazines and other modernist infrastructures in disseminating new sexual representations
- ☒ The sexual politics of modernism (gender, race and class)
- ☒ The ambivalent figure of the sex worker
- ☒ Sex and reproduction
- ☒ Challenges to heteronormativity
- ☒ Intersections between sexuality and disability
- ☒ Theories of sexuality and their influence on literary and artistic production
- ☒ Community, expatriation, and publication abroad, and the quest for sexual freedom
- ☒ Sex and censorship
- ☒ Representations of sexuality in colonial or imperial contexts
- ☒ The sexualised or desexualised body, and the modernist rethinking of the relation of the reproductive or somatic dimensions of biology to sex and eroticism
- ☒ The conservative or antagonistic positioning of many modernist authors to questions of changing sexual identities and practices
- ☒ Sex and the urban environments of modernity
- ☒ Emergent psychologies of sex and sexuality and their impact on Modernist production

Please send your abstracts (250-300 words), accompanied by a short biographical note, to the following addresses: btadie@parisnanterre.fr and chloe.thomas@u-paris.fr

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